

The Self-Actualization of John Adams

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Abstract

In the late 1960s, the prominent psychologist Abraham Maslow argued that music-making was an inherently bodily activity, which like sex, could induce what Maslow called “peak experiences”—moments of mystical transcendence and personal insight. Amass enough such peak experiences, Maslow suggested, and one could achieve “self-actualization”—the full realization of one’s potential as a human being. This article argues that though many musicians would heed Maslow’s words, few embodied Maslow’s program more than composer John Coolidge Adams did in the late 1970s. The article shows how Maslowian ideas shaped some of Adams’s formative musical experiences in the San Francisco Bay Area. The article further demonstrates how these same concepts inspired the development of Adams’s idiosyncratic post-minimalist idiom, with particular attention to Adams’s 1978 string septet Shaker Loops. By considering the influence of Adams’s countercultural milieu, the article reveals strains of primitivism, eroticism, and exoticism in Adams’s work more closely associated with Adams’s minimalist predecessors. It also presents an alternative view of postmodernism in music, arguing that for Adams, at least, to make music “after” modernism was to make music a medium of self-actualization.

In 1967 the prominent psychologist Abraham Maslow set out a new vision for music-making in the United States. As he told the crowd of musicians, educators, and luminaries gathered for the Tanglewood symposium on “Music in American Society,” Maslow founded his program on a revised understanding of Freudian psychology. Freud’s “one big mistake, which we are correcting now,” Maslow explained, “is that he thought of the unconscious merely as undesirable evil.”¹ Now, Maslow and other psychologists understood that in fact, “unconsciousness carries in it also the roots of creativeness, of joy, of happiness, of goodness.” According to Maslow, this higher unconscious carried the roots of music-making, too. And this, he suggested, was very good news.

For Maslow argued that if musicians or anyone else learned to tap into their higher unconscious, they opened themselves up to the potentially life-altering psychological events Maslow called “peak experiences.” In his Tanglewood address, Maslow likened the peak experience to a state of “transcendent ecstasy,” “a great and mystical experience, a religious experience if you wish—an illumination, a revelation, an insight.”² Peak experiences revealed latent energies and hidden capacities, and confirmed one’s sense of individuality and identity. In Maslow’s view,

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¹ This and the following quotation are from Abraham Maslow, “Music Education and Peak Experience,” *Music Educators Journal* 54, no. 72 (1968): 163.

² Maslow, “Music Education,” 164, 167.

these psychological peaks lead the seeker to their highest calling, what Maslow called “self-actualization”: the full realization of one’s potential as a human being.³

As the term suggested, the quintessential peak experience—for Maslow, anyway—was orgasm.⁴ But as Maslow was pleased to announce, there was more than one way to peak. “I want to report that the two easiest ways of getting peak experiences (in terms of simple statistics in empirical reports) are through music and through sex.”⁵ This was so because like sex, music-making was both primal and physical. “The rhythmic experience ... the good dancing of a rumba, or the kinds of things that the kids can do with drums,” Maslow mused to the Tanglewood crowd, “I don’t know whether you want to call that music, dancing, rhythm, athletics, or something else. The love for the body, awareness of the body, and a reverence for the body—that kind of thing that gets mixed in there—these are clearly good paths to peak experiences.”⁶ Maslow imagined that in their love for the music-making body (or was it their love-making musical body?), musicians could actualize their most fulfilled, creative, fully human self.

As Maslow’s images of Afro-Cuban gyrations and drum-happy children implied, his prescription for musical self-actualization came with a heavy dose of primitivist, erotic fantasy. But unlike in our own times, many in the late 1960s saw such exoticism as more feature than bug.⁷ At the height of the sexual revolution, Maslow’s message to the musicians of U.S. society was this: conquer your all-too-Freudian fears of the carnal body and make music a medium of peak experience and self-actualization.

Many musicians would heed Maslow’s call, but few composers embodied Maslow’s post-Freudian program more than John Coolidge Adams did in the late 1970s. Admittedly, next to slightly older and more overtly countercultural minimalist figures like Terry Riley, La Monte Young, or Steve Reich, Adams has always seemed something of a square. Adams has even been described, if playfully, as a “reactionary” postminimalist who garnered box-office success by wedding elements of minimalist style with “traditional notions of craft and compositional voice.”⁸ According to this perspective, the more Adams brought minimalism into mainstream concert life, the more the genre lost its countercultural edge.

I will argue otherwise. When Adams “broke the bonds” of minimalist orthodoxy in the late 1970s, he joined the ranks of U.S. musicians busily remaking concert music in the image of Maslow.⁹ To make this case, I will show how post-Freudian concepts shaped some of Adams’s formative musical experiences in the San Fran-

³ Maslow, “Music Education,” 169.

⁴ On “peak experience” as a sexual metaphor, see Jeffrey Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 149.

⁵ Maslow, “Music Education,” 164–65.

⁶ Maslow, “Music Education,” 168.

⁷ For a discussion of these themes in the context of popular music, for example, see Nadya Zimmerman, *Countercultural Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

⁸ Robert Fink, “(Post-)minimalisms 1970–2000: The Search for a New Mainstream,” in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 551, 542.

⁹ K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 177.

cisco Bay Area, where ideas like Maslow's enjoyed wide popularity. I will further demonstrate how these same ideas inspired the development of Adams's idiosyncratic postminimalist idiom. First, I will examine Adams's first experience conducting a minimalist work in 1977 and his influential collaboration with Charlemagne Palestine (born Chaim Moshe Tzadik Palestine, also known as Charles Martin Palestine) later that same year. Next, I will detail the genesis, aesthetics, and cultural politics of one of Adams's earliest and most significant pulse-based works, the ecstatic 1978 string septet *Shaker Loops*. In this work, I will argue, Adams embraced Maslow's post-Freudian vision for "music in American society." When he did this, Adams became a de facto leader of a broader Maslowian musical culture whose reach would extend far beyond Adams's own musical activities.

Eventually, Adams would credit the experience of composing *Shaker Loops* with liberating him from the ideological grip of musical modernism. Scholars often associate the postmodern in music with stylistic eclecticism and pastiche (especially in Adams's case), and Adams may well have identified with such a view.¹⁰ But for Adams, at least, to make music "after" modernism was also to make music a medium of peak experience and self-actualization. Still, we should not think that Maslow's vision delivered Adams from all of modernism's sins. As he strove to make U.S. musical culture postmodern, Adams, like Maslow before him, founded his platform on tropes of primitivism, eroticism, and exoticism characteristic of earlier modernist music. In the end, both Adams and Maslow were perhaps as uncritical of their own sexual and cultural politics as they were sincere in their humanistic aims. The fact that musicologists have largely ignored how Adams participated in Maslow's countercultural project says a lot about the modern-day legacy of the self-actualization culture Adams helped to build.

Me and My Music

Born in 1947, Adams arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1972, undergraduate and master's degrees from Harvard in hand. Like so many other white, well-educated, born-and-bred New Englanders of his generation, Adams had decided to trek west. Unlike many others of his generation, Adams managed to find steady, gainful employment there—as a teacher and leader of the New Music Ensemble, a student contemporary music group, at the San Francisco Conservatory.¹¹ Though Maslow had died in 1970, Adams arrived in the Bay Area just in time to see many San Franciscans experiment with putting ideas like Maslow's into practice. Inspired, perhaps, by his countercultural environs, eventually Adams would make his own musical contribution to the Bay Area's growing culture of peak experience and self-actualization.

For those seeking peak experience, Adams's San Francisco was a mecca. To take just one example, in 1973 Maslow acolyte and social reformer Michael Murphy

¹⁰ For a discussion of postmodernism and the aesthetics of eclecticism and pastiche, see Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 411–13, and 429–36. On Adams's "irreverent eclecticism," see Schwarz, *Minimalists*, 171.

¹¹ John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 69.

founded the Esalen Sports Center there (an offshoot of the famous Esalen Institute in Big Sur) which he dedicated to exploring how athletics could and often did induce mystical, even ecstatic experiences in participants.¹² The Center boasted an impressive lineup of peak experience-oriented programming, including workshops like “The Inner Game of Tennis” and “Inside Running.”¹³ The Center also maintained a remarkable roster of prominent U.S. athletes ready to lend credence to the Center’s Maslowian cause.¹⁴ With the backing of figures like former San Francisco 49ers quarterback John Brodie, the Center prompted the *New York Times* to declare a “revolution” in U.S. sports culture.¹⁵

The San Francisco Sports Center only confirmed what many around the country already knew: that the Bay Area had grown into the nation’s top distributor of a new, Maslowian view of the body that idealized physical activity as a source of unforeseen energies, mystical insights, and personal satisfaction. As sociologist Sam Binkley has shown, Bay Area seekers not only developed numerous methods and programs for bodily exploration and self-discovery, but a robust print media consumer culture through which to market them.¹⁶ In the numerous guides and directories they published, San Franciscans promoted various forms of psychosomatic practice, from jogging and yoga to massage and meditation. In texts like the 1973 book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, they taught female readers that in “learning to understand, accept, and be responsible for our physical selves, we are freed ... to use our untapped energies.”¹⁷ And through numerous self-help books, they reimagined sex, in Binkley’s words, as “an autonomous object of manipulation and creative play, a pleasurable end in itself, but also a technique of self-realization and mutual exploration.”¹⁸ All this Binkley has dubbed a culture of “getting loose.” When San Franciscans looked to loosen up, they were seeking “a more authentic, innocent, and original source of the self, and ... a way of living that was more primary and immediate but also more active and creative.”¹⁹ They were seeking, in other words, exactly what Maslow had envisioned for musicians.

Soon enough, concert musicians in the Bay Area and beyond joined in, and it is likely Adams knew their work. In the early 1970s, for example, experimental composer Pauline Oliveros (recently relocated from San Francisco to San Diego) adapted tai chi as taught by the Esalen workshop leader Al Huang to develop her *Sonic Meditations*, works designed to help participants loosen up their deeper, more

¹² On Murphy and the Sports Center, see Kripal, *Esalen*, 282–86. See also Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 230–232; and Michael Murphy, “Sport as Yoga,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 17, no. 4 (1977).

¹³ Unsigned, *The Esalen Catalogue*, 14, no. 4 (October–December 1976), 12. See W. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (New York: Random House, 1974).

¹⁴ See the account in Kripal cited in note 12.

¹⁵ William N. Wallace, “New Esalen Center Spurs a Sports Revolution,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1973.

¹⁶ Binkley, *Getting Loose*.

¹⁷ Introduction to Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), quoted in Binkley, *Getting Loose*, 214.

¹⁸ Binkley, *Getting Loose*, 171.

¹⁹ Binkley, *Getting Loose*, 3.

authentic musical selves.²⁰ Adams probably knew about Oliveros's meditational method, if not through her reputation in the Bay Area, then through Betty Wong, an Oliveros student Adams featured on one of his new music concerts at the San Francisco Conservatory in 1973.²¹ In 1977, the Esalen teacher Judith Aston gave a workshop at the San Francisco Conservatory in "Aston Patterning," Aston's psychosomatic self-awareness technique developed from Rolfing, the famous Esalen massage practice. At least eight of the fourteen students who participated in Aston's workshops also performed with the New Music Ensemble under Adams in 1977 and 1978.²² Beyond San Francisco, around the same time the prominent soprano Jan DeGaetani developed a related technique for relieving bodily tension and increasing expressive immediacy, based in part on the bodywork practice of dancer Elaine Summers, a onetime student of Esalen-regular Charlotte Selver.²³ By the late 1960s, even the reformed serialist George Rochberg was touting erotic energies and paranormal consciousness as the most authentic tools of musical expression.²⁴ Across the United States but in Adams's Bay Area especially, the seeds Maslow planted had blossomed into a musical culture of peak experience and self-actualization.

This post-Freudian spring had been long in coming.²⁵ In the 1950s, the philosopher and cultural critic Herbert Marcuse had envisioned a society enriched by liberated bodily energies.²⁶ If Marcuse remained best known among intellectuals and left-wing activists, his like-minded contemporary, the eccentric philosopher, former Freud student, and inventor Wilhelm Reich actually achieved a measure of popular appeal touting his "Orgone Energy Accumulator," a domestic appliance designed to enhance erotic energies and cure neuroses.²⁷ (Reich died imprisoned in 1957, but his machine remained popular enough to be parodied in Woody Allen's iconic 1973 film *Sleeper* as the "Orgasmatron.") By the late 1960s, Marcuse

²⁰ I discuss this and the other examples cited in this paragraph in my doctoral dissertation, John Kapusta, "American Music in the Culture of Self-Actualization: Composition and Performance in the Long 1970s" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2017).

²¹ See the New Music Ensemble concert program, John Adams, director, May 10, 1973, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives.

²² See the archival film of Aston at the San Francisco Conservatory, "Aston Patterning at the San Francisco Conservatory," dated January 1, 1977, held at the Esalen Institute archive in Big Sur, California, and the New Music Ensemble programs held at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music archives, some of which are cited below.

²³ As DeGaetani said of her pedagogy in a 1973 interview, "My job is to help my students find a way around their tensions. Once they relax and accept their vulnerability on stage, they can release their sensibilities to the audience." Jan DeGaetani, interview by Robert S. Clark, "Jan DeGaetani: How to Combine Several Careers Successfully," *Stereo Review*, September 1973, 78. I discuss the work of Summers and DeGaetani in Kapusta, "American Music in the Culture of Self-Actualization," 15. On Summers and Selver, see also Kerry O'Brien, "Listening as Activism: The 'Sonic Meditations' of Pauline Oliveros." *New Yorker*, December 9, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/listening-as-activism-the-sonic-meditations-of-pauline-oliveros>.

²⁴ See Kapusta, "American Music in the Culture of Self-Actualization," 53.

²⁵ For a contemporary commentary on the popularity of such ideas, see Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 224–60..

²⁶ See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

²⁷ On Reich's ideas, see Kripal, *Esalen*, 231–34.

and Reich had been dubbed leaders of the “Freudian Left”—a radical school of post-Freudians who, like Maslow, adopted “explicitly religious or poetic languages in order to embrace and celebrate the id as a mystical force of orgasmic bliss, social revolution, and ... even bodily transfiguration.”²⁸

While some celebrated its emergence, many critics bemoaned and maligned the Freudian Left and the culture of peak experience it helped to spawn. “The beat ... goes ... Me... Me... Me... Me...”²⁹ Thus it was with a disconcerting musical metaphor that the journalist provocateur Tom Wolfe concluded his infamous 1976 *New York* magazine article, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” one of the most influential indictments of the self-actualization culture and its apparent narcissism. In that essay, Wolfe described a group therapy session that quickly morphs into an apparent collective peak experience—a frenzy of “release and liberation” complete with a chorus of titillating moans and groans.³⁰ But far from a true religious experience, as Wolfe explains, the sham peak experience was actually instigated by nothing less vulgar or banal than one participant’s personal preoccupation: “me and my hemorrhoids.”³¹ Numerous like-minded critics joined Wolfe to lament a generation of misguided young people who wrongly imagined that self-discovery, as Christopher Lasch put it in 1979, required “the overthrow of inhibition and the immediate gratification of every impulse.”³² Where some saw self-actualization, in other words, others saw only self-gratification. But as Wolfe and Lasch begrudgingly recognized, there was no denying that peak experience had become a national pastime. By the end of the Me Decade, John Adams was ready to play.

Techniques of Ecstasy

When he arrived in San Francisco, Adams was still in his mid-twenties and had yet to develop his now-familiar, pulsing compositional idiom.³³ Adams began to find himself, so to speak, only after two firsthand experiences with pulse-based minimalism—a 1977 performance of Steve Reich’s 1973 *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* with the student-musicians of the San Francisco

²⁸ Kripal, *Esalen*, 144. The term “Freudian Left” was coined by historian of psychoanalysis (and more recently, opera) Paul Robinson in 1969. See Paul Robinson, *The Freudian Left: Wilhelm Reich, Geza Roheim, Herbert Marcuse* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

²⁹ Tom Wolfe, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” in *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), 167. First published in *New York Magazine*, August 23, 1975, 26–40.

³⁰ Wolfe, “The Me Decade,” 132.

³¹ Wolfe, “The Me Decade,” 126.

³² Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 13. For similar critiques, see Edwin M. Schur, *The Awareness Trap: Self-Absorption Instead of Social Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977) and Peter Marin, “The New Narcissism,” *Harper’s* (October, 1975). On the trope of “self-absorption” in 1970s U.S. cultural criticism, see Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³³ For a rare, contemporary glimpse into Adams’s early works and aesthetic, see John Adams, interview by Charles Amirkhanian, “Ode to Gravity: Interview with John Adams, 1973,” originally broadcast on April 18, 1973, KPFA Radio, Berkeley, CA. <http://radiom.org/detail.php?omid=OTG.1973.04.18.A>.

Conservatory New Music Ensemble, and second, later that same year, a collaboration between the ensemble and the composer and performer Charlemagne Palestine. Scholars have only recently begun to explore the variety of minimalist experience in the 1970s, but even a glance at the historical record suggests how diverse listeners' and musicians' understanding of the genre could be.³⁴ Around 1977, Adams and the New Music Ensemble appear to have begun to forge a Bay Area minimalist hermeneutic of their own. Together, they would develop a minimalist practice for the me generation.

A program note Adams and the ensemble provided for their performance of Reich's *Music for Mallet Instruments* foregrounded themes familiar from the Bay Area's loosened culture, and suggests that Adams and the ensemble had begun to interpret Reich's music as a pathway to peak experience.³⁵ Calling to mind Maslow's primal images of rumbas, naïve child drummers, and extraordinary states of consciousness, the note described Reich's work as an "eminently performable," "primitive" rite that produced an occult "energy state" in performers and listeners alike. In a further echo of Maslow, the note likened that primitive, out-of-the-ordinary "energy state" to "a feeling of ecstasy," and emphasized that this peak-like state arose from the act of music-making itself. "Running as they do on human rather than mechanical or electrical energy," the note argued, Reich's modular works were "capable of doing what mere hardware cannot: they can take the listener out of his normal state; they can (and sometimes do) produce in the listener a feeling of ecstasy." In true Maslowian form, the note described Reich's work as an archaic ritual that unleashed primal energies in the act of performance and launched participants into ecstasy.

Of course, Adams and the New Music Ensemble were hardly the first musicians to describe minimalist music as a "technique of ecstasy," to borrow a phrase from the historian of religion and countercultural guru Mircea Eliade.³⁶ In fact, they had been preceded in this by Steve Reich himself. As Kerry O'Brien has discussed, Reich frequently compared his music to yoga in the 1970s, describing both as practices of self-discipline, and yes, "ecstasy."³⁷ But the New Music Ensemble program note suggests that Adams and the Ensemble imagined Reich's music in a different vein. Reich and the New Music Ensemble, I would suggest, diverged along lines familiar

³⁴ For a primary source, see Tom Johnson's reviews of minimalist works in *The Voice of New Music* (Paris: Editions 75, 1989). For scholarly accounts, see Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Jeremy Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁵ Program note (unsigned) for Steve Reich, *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* (1973), included in the New Music Ensemble concert program, John Adams, director, April 15, 1977, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives.

³⁶ See Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964).

³⁷ See Kerry O'Brien, "'Machine Fantasies into Human Events': Reich and Technology in the 1970s," in *Rethinking Reich*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming) and Reich, "Music and Performance (1969–74; 1993)," in *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 81–82. For more on Reich and Yoga, see Russell Hartenberger, *Performance Practice in the Music of Steve Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

to scholars of South Asian religion and its popularization in the postwar United States. Historian of religion Jeffrey Kripal has borrowed the language of Tantric philosophy to explain how sixties and seventies counterculturists cultivated both more ascetic, “right-handed” meditation traditions as well as more overtly carnal, “left-handed” practices like Tantric sex and Kundalini yoga. As Kripal explains, “Whereas left-handed Tantric traditions ... are those that insist on the actual performance of transgressive acts and sexual rituals ... right-handed Tantric traditions are those that have sublimated these same acts and rituals into internal contemplative exercises ... that still bear the stamp of the original erotic union but are now quite removed from any literal act or ‘polluting’ sexual fluid.”³⁸

Applying the left-hand, right-hand metaphor to seventies minimalism, we might say that while Reich practiced a more contemplative, “right-handed” minimalism of self-sublimation, Adams and the New Music Ensemble seem to have adopted a looser, more “left-handed” approach. To be sure, we can only draw a loose analogy between Reich, Adams, and these divergent Tantric traditions—both Adams and Reich, after all, insisted on the actual performance of minimalist music in their quest for ecstasy. And yet Reich did seem to prefer to sublimate the act of performance into a “purer” act of contemplation. Not only did Reich claim to discipline his “individual thoughts and feelings” in performance, “subjugating myself to the music,” as he put it, but he also frequently insisted that the real source of pleasure in his music was the interlocking patterns of sound his music generated, patterns that could be contemplated like a mandala or other meditation object.³⁹ As he put it in 1968, Reich wanted to produce works that sounded like “a process happening so slowly and gradually that listening to it resembles watching a minute hand on a watch.”⁴⁰ The New Music Ensemble program note acknowledged Reich’s position, but attributed the music’s ecstasies to the “human ... energy” exerted in performance. In so doing, the note seems to have given Reich’s right-handed, contemplative music a more left-handed spin. Later that year, Adams’s career would veer yet more sharply to the “left” of Reich, when he and the New Music Ensemble encountered the left-handed minimalist par excellence, Charlemagne Palestine.

A Little Bit like a Bordello

Adams would frequently cite his performance of *Music for Mallet Instruments* in 1977 as a turning point in his career, and it was—though he would continue to dabble in other genres, he would rise to fame by composing pulsing, repetitive music reminiscent of Reich’s.⁴¹ But the performance was significant for another reason, for evidence also suggests that when Adams composed his first pulsing,

³⁸ Kripal, *Esalen*, 20.

³⁹ Reich, “Music and Performance,” 82.

⁴⁰ Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process (1968)” in *Writings on Music*, 36.

⁴¹ For firsthand accounts of the impact of the Reich performance, see K. Robert Schwarz, “Process vs. Intuition in the Recent Works of Steve Reich and John Adams,” *American Music* 8, no. 3 (1990): 256; Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 89; and Ingram Marshall and Thomas May, “Ingram Marshall on the Early Years in San Francisco,” in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*, ed. Thomas May (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2006), 69.

process-based works, he did so with the flow of the New Music Ensemble's left-handed energies in mind. After the Reich performance, Adams composed two pulsing piano solos, *Phrygian Gates* and its companion piece *China Gates*. As K. Robert Schwarz has argued, these works could rightly be described as "process" music akin to Reich's.⁴² And yet when Adams used the term "gate" in the title of these works, he placed energy flow at their conceptual core. As Adams explained later, a "gate" was a piece of hardware, often used in electronic music composition, "that passes a certain amount of current on a given command."⁴³

In his next, more ambitious work, the string septet *Shaker Loops*, Adams would again make energy flow a theme, but this time, the work's title and dramatic design would make clear that the energies Adams had in mind were explicitly carnal. To get there, it would take one more direct experience with minimalism, this time with a musician after Maslow's own heart, the composer and performer Charlemagne Palestine. Following Palestine's example, Adams would develop his energy-based minimalist aesthetic into a full-fledged post-Freudian compositional practice.

If ever there was a composer of the me generation, it was Palestine. In the late sixties and early seventies, Palestine led composition classes at the California Institute of the Arts that mirrored faddish inward-facing group therapies like those Wolfe mercilessly mocked in his 1976 "Me Decade" essay. With his students gathered in a dark room, Palestine would instruct them "to search out with your body and your voice any way you want to try to articulate deep inside what seems most at the root of your sentiments and externalize them."⁴⁴ Palestine would sit in a corner doing the same, "making this kind of a 'AHHHG,' sort of searching inside for my demons in a way," as he told an interviewer in the mid-1970s. Compare this to how Wolfe described the woman obsessed with "me and my hemorrhoids": "To let the feeling gush forth ... she starts moaning ... AAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRGGGGGGGH-HHHHHH!"⁴⁵ Outside the classroom, Palestine imagined his performances, too, as a quasi-mystical process of self-exploration. "What I'm gonna try to bring to music now is a looking inside," he explained, "so every concert I do is always more than just a piece. It means that everybody who's in it is going through some kind of reevaluation in some sense. Do you know what I mean?"⁴⁶ Like Maslow, Palestine well understood the implicit connections between musical self-discovery and the carnal body. "It was a little bit like a bordello," he said of his classes in 1976—"a-u-r-a-l intercourse."⁴⁷ In the same interview, he even claimed that his self-exploratory performance practice had emerged spontaneously from euphoric

⁴² Schwarz, "Process vs. Intuition," 256–58.

⁴³ John Adams, interview by Jonathan Cott, "An Interview with John Adams by Jonathan Cott, June 1985," John Adams, *Harmonielehre*, with the San Francisco Symphony conducted by Edo de Waart, liner notes, Nonesuch 7559-79115-2, 1985. Following suggestions Adams has made elsewhere, scholars often think of Adams's "gates" as changes in harmony, but we might just as easily think of them as changes in energy. For the former view, see Fink, "(Post-)minimalisms," 544.

⁴⁴ Charlemagne Palestine, interview by Walter Zimmerman in *Desert Plants: Conversations with 23 American Musicians*, by Walter Zimmerman (Vancouver: A.R.C. Publications, 1976), 263.

⁴⁵ Wolfe, "The Me Decade," 132.

⁴⁶ Palestine, interview by Zimmerman, 268.

⁴⁷ Palestine, interview by Zimmerman, 262.

improvisations at the piano in a dark room after sex.⁴⁸ Maslow had little taste for new music, but he would have had to admit that Palestine had seemed to make music a medium of self-actualization.

As we would expect, Palestine's peaking performances were intensely physical affairs. In the 1970s he was renowned for improvising "minimal" pieces on a Bösendorfer piano—often pounding out only a handful of chords in a sitting—and for marathon solo vocal theatrics. "Palestine knelt quietly on the floor for a while, just rocking and breathing," critic Tom Johnson wrote of a 1974 New York performance, "and then gradually picking up steam both physically and vocally. When the performance climaxed, about twenty minutes later, he was reiterating loud tones and throwing himself vigorously onto his hands."⁴⁹ The dramatic potential of Palestine's orgasmic performances intrigued Johnson. "I suspect they could lead to some extraordinary form of full-blown music theater," he wrote, "especially if Palestine ever figures out how to present such things with a group of people instead of as solos." Three years later, Palestine would do just that—in San Francisco, at the invitation of John Adams.

Adams commissioned Palestine to compose and lead a new work for the New Music Ensemble for a December 1977 concert.⁵⁰ Palestine answered with a piece for twelve strings he called *Birth of a Sonority*. Palestine assigned each member of the Ensemble a "sonority" to play in rehearsal (there was no score). Then, in performance, Palestine proceeded to coax those sonorities from the players with wild gesticulations. The result was a form of conducted improvisation similar to the group improvisation practices composers like John Zorn and Lawrence "Butch" Morris were exploring around the same time.⁵¹ "It sets up a physical rapport with the players," Palestine said of *Birth of a Sonority* in a 1980 interview, "so that at any moment, a conductor can get a sense of intensity or sense of motion on the pitches from the player without any middle notation in a way—it's a totally physical kind of interaction."⁵²

Such aggressively intimate music-making may have been more than his musicians bargained for. By Adams's account, Palestine subjected the New Music Ensemble to the kind of red-blooded musical treatment Palestine was used to inflicting on his Bösendorfer. But Adams found Palestine's unrestrained carnality inspiring. In fact, Adams would later suggest that when Palestine gave his totally

⁴⁸ Palestine, interview by Zimmerman, 267.

⁴⁹ This and the following quotation are from Johnson, "January 31, 1974. Charlemagne Palestine: Electronics, Voice, and Piano," in *The Voice of New Music*.

⁵⁰ See the New Music Ensemble concert program, John Adams, director, December 3, 1977, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives.

⁵¹ Morris might have called Palestine's style of conducted improvisation "conduction." See the liner notes in Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris, *Testament: A Conduction Collection*, New World Records, New World 80478–2, 1995. On Zorn's group improvisation "game" pieces, see David Brackett, "Some Notes on John Zorn's *Cobra*," *American Music* 28, no. 1 (2010): 44–75, and John Zorn, interview by Edward Strickland in *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music*, ed. Edward Strickland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

⁵² Charlemagne Palestine, interview by Charles Amir Khanian, "Morning Concert: An Interview with Charlemagne Palestine," originally broadcast on November 20, 1980, KPFA Radio, Berkeley, CA. <http://radiom.org/detail.php?omid=MC.1980.11.20>.

physical performance with the New Music Ensemble, the spectacle liberated Adams to seek a totally physical musical aesthetic of his own—an aesthetic he would first realize in a 1978 string septet, *Shaker Loops*. As Adams remembered of Palestine and *Birth of a Sonority* in the early 1980s,

He did a fifteen- or twenty-minute piece based essentially on the format of his piano pieces He stood in front of this group . . . who had no notation or anything. . . . They knew what intervals to play . . . and he conducted them and got very passionately involved physically. . . . I realized in watching him that he was attempting to do something that I very much wanted to do, only I took a much different tack and it resulted in *Shaker Loops*, which is a very physical and very muscular piece. I always have to acknowledge that debt to Charlemagne, that he sort of liberated a certain physical relationship to my own music that may have taken me longer to do had I not experienced that with him.⁵³

The liberation Adams found in the Palestine performance changed his career. Freed—or perhaps better, “loosened”—Adams composed *Shaker Loops*, which quickly became his most popular work and eventually attracted the attention of director Peter Sellars, with whom Adams would skyrocket to international fame collaborating on works like *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*.⁵⁴

To the extent that Palestine helped Adams find his compositional voice and subsequent success, we might say superficially that Palestine paved the way for Adams’s self-actualization as a composer. But as Adams’s account of his physical liberation suggests, Palestine’s performance set Adams on the path to self-actualization in a specifically Maslowian sense. Today, few remember that Palestine influenced Adams at all—Adams himself seems to have largely disavowed him.⁵⁵ But a more forthcoming Adams knew that Palestine had shown him how to get loose. Soon, with a little inspiration from the Shakers, Adams would be ready to give composing his own brand of totally physical minimalism a whirl.

Shake!

When Adams composed *Shaker Loops* in 1978, he finally made his own original contribution to the music of the Me Decade. Today we might be tempted to hear *Shaker Loops*’ effusively tonal, neoromantic idiom as a political statement about the demise of musical modernism, but the work had other, perhaps more significant ideological resonances. As Schwarz observed in the late 1980s, the piece entailed a “loosening of musical process” in comparison to the rigid procedures of Steve Reich, but that “loosening” was more than merely stylistic.⁵⁶ Bay Area seekers would likely have recognized *Shaker Loops* as a celebration of their loos-

⁵³ John Adams, interview by Plush, “Major Figures in American Music.” For a similar account, see Adams, Presentation at the USC Thornton School of Music, November 1, 1985, California Audio-visual Preservation Project. https://archive.org/details/calasus_000045.

⁵⁴ Adams describes Sellars’s enthusiasm for *Shaker Loops* in Matthew Daines, “An Interview with John Adams” *The Opera Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1996): 43.

⁵⁵ Adams’s recent autobiography mentions Palestine only briefly. Although he calls Palestine a “strange genius,” Adams seems to bring him up only to distance himself from Palestine’s apparent *épaté la bourgeoisie* attitude. Adams’s short account of Palestine does not mention *Shaker Loops*. See Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 97–98.

⁵⁶ K. Robert Schwarz, “Process vs. Intuition,” 258.

Figure 1. Reich, *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*, modules 1-2, composer's self-published manuscript.

ened lifestyle. At a time when critics like Wolfe and Lasch made notions of peak experience and self-actualization more controversial than ever, *Shaker Loops* implied Adams's allegiance to Maslow.

There can be little doubt that Adams took Palestine's example to heart when he composed *Shaker Loops*. Faced with the task of translating Palestine's unnotated, totally physical musicality onto paper, Adams wed the Dionysian physicality of Palestine's *Birth of a Sonority* with the Apollonian notational system of Reich's *Music for Mallet Instruments*. From a structural perspective, Adams borrowed most heavily from Reich (Figures 1 and 2). Adams constructed *Shaker Loops* from a series of musical modules and submodules consisting of short musical fragments set to be repeated indefinitely until the ensemble leader signaled the group to move on.

But as if in imitation of the "passionately involved" physicality of *Birth of a Sonority*, Adams filled his modules not with texturally uniform, interlocking rhythmic motives but with blocks of conspicuously varied, gestural figures. This difference accounts for the two works' radically opposed sonic effects. Reich composed the modules of *Music for Mallet Instruments* with strict metrical regularity, so that the transition from one module to another feels pronounced, even jarring—an effect Reich famously christened "perceptible process."⁵⁷ Adams's processes, by contrast, are anything but perceptible. Adams seems to have composed his loops to suppress, rather than reinforce, the sense of a prevailing meter, producing an affect of Palestinesque, unrestrained engagement in the physical task of playing the loop. Not only did Adams fill his modules with asymmetrical loops, but he designed a prevailing loop—the "shaking" sixteenth-note rhythmic figure in the first and second violins—that feeds into itself without break; it is simply a string of continuous, undifferentiated pulses. As more soloistic loops rise out of the texture with seeming spontaneity (the third violin in Figure 2, module 1, for instance), we

⁵⁷ Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process (1968)," 34.

Figure 2. Adams, *Shaker Loops*, part 1, “Shaking and Trembling,” modules 1–2, published score. (John Adams. *Shaker Loops*, Version for String Septet. New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1983)

can almost see Palestine aggressively beckoning players to “birth” their sonorities. Later, Adams resorts to a different strategy for subverting meter: rather than using tightly compacted loops of continuous pulses, he slows the pulse to create modules of overlapping long-held tones. Elsewhere in the piece, longer, lyrical loops are set against both long-tone loops and the meterless “shaking” motif from the opening movement (Example 1). The result of all this is a modularly organized work whose constituent “loops” hardly seem like “loops” at all. Instead, *Shaker Loops* sounds like irrepressible, loosened bodies surging toward climax, the deific vision, the peak experience.

In this way, *Shaker Loops* depicted the nineteenth-century Shaker sect in the image of the loosened 1970s. As a note supplied for the premiere indicated, *Shaker Loops* referred specifically to the “rhythmic shaking” the Shakers used “to induce visionary mental states” or “Ecstastick Fits.”⁵⁸ As that original program note also made clear, Adams’s Shakers got what they danced for: the third movement, later published simply as “Loops and Verses,” was first entitled “Loops and Verses in the

⁵⁸ Program note (unsigned) for *Shaker Loops*, included in the New Music Ensemble concert program, John Adams, director, December 15, 1978, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives. Given the authoritative tone of the note and the fact that Adams led the performance, it seems highly likely that the note was written by Adams himself.

Example 1. Divinely inspired lyrical “verses” and shaking loops in Adams, *Shaker Loops*, part 3, “Loops and Verses [in the Presence of the Lord],” mm. 3–12 (some parts omitted). (John Adams. *Shaker Loops*. Version for String Septet. New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1983)

intermission

John Adams: *Shaker Loops* (1978) for 7 strings

Part I. Shaking and Trembling

Part II. Hymning Slews

**Part III. Loops and Verses in the Presence
of the Lord**

Part IV. A Final Shaking

(first performance)

Figure 3. Original movement titles of *Shaker Loops*, as printed in the program for the premiere performance. New Music Ensemble concert program, John Adams, director, December 15, 1978, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Archives.

Presence of the Lord” (Figure 3). In this, *Shaker Loops* presented a depiction of its eponymous community that would have been uncontroversial in any decade. But the work took one more interpretive leap—one that marked it as a product of the seventies and its composer as a devotee of peak experience.

Adams speculated that the Shakers’ spiritual exercises were overtly carnal, and did not shy away from celebrating that eroticism. “You know the Shakers were celibate,” Adams told a group of students at the University of Southern California in 1985.⁵⁹

And each Saturday night, or I don’t know how many times a week ... they would do this divine dance that would bring them to a frenzy. And I’m sure ... the effect of this had to

⁵⁹ This and the block quotation below are from John Adams, presentation at the USC Thornton School of Music, 1985.

be as much of an erotic experience as it was a religious one. And I tried to imagine while writing this piece, the piece was very much inspired by the idea of these people and this dance in which [Adams performs an emphatic up-and-down hand gesture] they got into a, they got locked into a kind of loop, which went faster and faster until they reached a visionary state. So, there is a kind of a religious, but clearly erotic overtone of this piece.⁶⁰

Exactly where Adams got his ideas about the Shakers' supposedly sublimated sex lives is unclear. Perhaps he was inspired by Wolfe's "Me Decade" screed, which stopped short of calling the Shakers a sex cult but did describe them as the United States' original practitioners of "release and liberation."⁶¹

Or perhaps Adams sensed what some critics were beginning to suspect about pulse-based minimalism: that the genre was really an erotic dance music akin to its more expressly carnal cousin, disco. As Robert Fink has pointed out, in the early 1980s one critic even called minimalism the "higher disco."⁶² We cannot say whether Adams had disco in mind when he composed *Shaker Loops*, but he suggested as much when he speculated that the Shakers would gather "each Saturday night," quickly adding, as if catching himself, "or I don't know how many times a week." From this, it is hard not to think that images of the 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever*, or perhaps the 1976 essay on which it was based, "Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night," may have been gyrating in Adams's erotic musical imagination when he composed *Shaker Loops*. But whether it was a conservative op-ed piece, a loosened Bay Area sex manual, or his own imagination that inspired him to eroticize Shaker ritual, when Adams staged the seventies spiritual zeitgeist in *Shaker Loops*, he cast his lot with the me generation.

Indeed, the work's contemporary relevance, and its political point, would have been hard to miss. By the late 1970s, the Shakers had become a political football.⁶³ And as Wolfe's essay suggested, the Shakers also evoked more recent sexual and religious practices. This was the era of the so-called "Jesus Movement," when Charismatic Christians (pejoratively labeled "holy rollers") brought paranormal and even erotic experiences of the Holy Spirit into the mainstream.⁶⁴ In the mid-1970s one such group, known as the "Children of God," notoriously added free love to its ecstatic evangelization program.⁶⁵ Wolfe could have been describing these

⁶⁰ Similarly, in 1983 Adams said of the Shakers, "I knew ... they had this strange ritual, where these otherwise celibate people would meet once a week and do this dance, which probably was invested with all their pent-up sublimated sexual and emotional energies. And so that awareness and that supposition was in the back of my mind in doing this piece." Adams, interview by Plush, "Major Figures in American Music."

⁶¹ Wolfe, "The Me Decade," 161–62.

⁶² Richard Sennett, "Twilight of the Tenured Composer," *Harper's* 269 (December 1984) quoted in Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 27. Fink goes on to document the historical connections between disco and minimalism at length.

⁶³ Wolfe deplored the Shakers' contemporary influence, but others felt otherwise. For more positive references to the Shakers, see Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 321; Robert Houriet, *Getting Back Together* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1971), 81; and Ellen Estrin, "Recreating Ritual Dance," *Yoga Journal* no. 27 (July–August 1979): 18.

⁶⁴ On the Jesus Movement and the U.S. media, see Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955–93* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 117–18.

⁶⁵ McCloud, *American Religious Fringe*, 122.

The image shows a musical score for a string septet. It consists of seven staves, each representing a different instrument: Vn. I, Vn. II, Vn. III, Va. (Viola), Vc. I (Violin I), Vc. II (Violin II), and Db. (Double Bass). The music is written in treble clef and features rapid sixteenth-note loops. Dynamic markings include *ffz* (fortissimo with accent) and *fff* (fortissimo). A 'shake!' instruction is placed above the Vn. III staff in the third measure of the fourth system. The score is divided into four measures per system, with a repeat sign at the end of the first three measures in each system.

Example 2. Adams, *Shaker Loops*, part 1, “Shaking and Trembling,” module 20, mm. 7–10. (John Adams. *Shaker Loops*. Version for String Septet. New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1983)

unchurched youths as much as Maslow’s psychology or Adams’s music when he opined that “sex had now become a religion ... in which the orgasm had become a form of spiritual ecstasy.”⁶⁶ But Adams didn’t seem to be complaining. If anything, he seemed to be celebrating a vision of his national past that resonated with his loosened, Maslowian present.

For *Shaker Loops* went beyond merely depicting acknowledged forerunners of the me generation to actually represent the work’s performers, including Adams himself, as participants in a post-Freudian peak experience. According to the original program note, the term “shaker” in the title referred not only to the religious group but also to the fact that “the primary means of playing here is by shaking the bow across the strings.”⁶⁷ With its punning title, *Shaker Loops* represented the players’ rapid bow strokes as the equivalent of the Shakers’ rhythmic dance, thereby staging the act of music-making as a medium of peak experience. At one climactic moment, Adams even added the instruction “shake!” to a set of running sixteenth-note loops already marked triple *forte* (Example 2). The piece also called for the musicians to perform an impressive catalogue of other string techniques—sul tasto, flautando, spiccato, pizzicato, at the point, tremolo and quasi-tremolo, “brush stroke,” “off the string,” the placing and removing of mutes—as well as less-specialized but no less characteristic gestures like trills and

⁶⁶ Wolfe, “The Me Decade,” 160. On the links between the counterculture and fundamentalist religion, see Preston Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right: From the Counterculture of Jerry Garcia to the Subculture of Jerry Falwell* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

⁶⁷ Program note (unsigned) for *Shaker Loops*, 1978.

glissandi. In *Shaker Loops*, Adams had forged a fusion not only of “music, dancing, rhythm, athletics”—to recall Maslow’s list of “good paths to peak experiences”—but of musicianship.

And for the premiere, at least, which Adams conducted, Adams provided a part for himself, too. “The conductor watches over the progressions through the loops and signals the movement from one to another,” the program note explained. Adams gave himself a role not unlike the “dance master” in contemporary accounts of the Whirling Dervishes of Turkey’s Mevlevi Sufi order, a group often compared to the Shakers at the time and well known in the United States from touring performances.⁶⁸ (Indeed, by the late 1970s one could even attend a workshop in Dervish dance held, appropriately enough, on the grounds of a former Shaker colony in New Lebanon, New York.⁶⁹) As one writer described the Dervish dance in 1975, “All the dervishes unfold and whirl as the musicians play and the chorus chants. . . . The energy from above enters . . . [and] passes through the body As they turn the dance master slowly walks among them gesturing with his eyes or position to correct their speed or posture.”⁷⁰ As Wolfe and others bemoaned the revival of Shaker-like practices in their own day, Adams wrote himself and his musicians into a Shaker-inspired ritual of musical peak experience.

The Self-Actualization of John Adams

Shaker Loops transformed its players into a band of seventies seekers, but on another level, it also transformed its composer. Across the 1980s, Adams repeatedly described his own creativity as a physical, sensual, and mystical process, suggesting that by this time Adams had come to identify with the model of Maslowian musical creativity he had witnessed in the work of Palestine and gone on to depict in *Shaker Loops*. As previously mentioned, Adams credited Palestine with helping him find his creative voice. Eventually, Adams would turn to the same post-Freudian imagery to explain how he had liberated himself from the clutches of musical modernism.

By the mid-1980s, Adams was describing himself as a Maslowian composer for whom music-making was inherently physical. “I’m not the kind of composer that takes a sheet of manuscript paper and a pencil and goes off into another room with no other apparatus and creates music,” Adams told an interviewer in 1986.⁷¹ “For me, creativity is very much like being an athlete. . . . It’s a very physical activity for me. . . . I’m of a breed of composer for whom the physical touch of the sound is paramount to the creative act.” Phrases like “very much like . . . an athlete,” “very

⁶⁸ For comparisons between the Whirling Dervishes and the Shakers, see Wolfe, “The Me Decade,” 161; Houriet, *Getting Back Together*, 8; and Estrin, “Recreating Ritual Dance,” 16–18. See also Edward B. Fiske, “Whirling Dervishes Show Ancient Ritual in Brooklyn,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1972.

⁶⁹ See Doris Kuller, “Ten Journeys for the Spirit,” *New York Magazine*, March 28, 1977.

⁷⁰ Ira Friedlander, *The Whirling Dervishes: Being an Account of the Sufi Order Known as the Mevlevi and its Founder the Poet and Mystic Mevlana Jalalu’d-din Rumi* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 92.

⁷¹ The quotations in this and the next paragraph are from Jim Berrow and Barrie Gavin, *John Adams: Minimalism and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1992), VHS.

The image displays a musical score for Example 3, consisting of two systems of music. The first system features a vocal line (Soprano, S.) and two instrumental lines (A. II and A. IV). The vocal line begins with the word "Ah," followed by a long note. The instrumental lines are marked with "ing. and row ing. and row ing. and row ing. and". The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "the seal" and "and row ing. and row ing. and row ing. and". The instrumental lines continue with "row ing. and row ing. and row ing. and". The score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature.

Example 3. Carnal “rowing” induces a visionary verse on the sea. Adams, *Harmonium*, mvt. III, “Wild Nights,” mm. 289–93 (some parts omitted). (John Adams. *Harmonium*. New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1981)

physical activity,” and “physical touch of sound” all evoked the muscular demands of *Birth of a Sonority* and *Shaker Loops*. In the image of Maslow and Palestine before him, Adams was a composer in touch with his body.

When Adams elaborated on this point, he suggested that the physicality he had in mind was expressly carnal. Referring to a line of text from *Harmonium*, Adams’s 1981 follow-up to *Shaker Loops* for chorus and orchestra, Adams told the interviewer, “Then there’s this wonderful image of throwing away the compass, ‘Done with the compass’. . . And in a sense, my odyssey as a composer has had to do with throwing away the compass, throwing away the chart, and saying I believe that my intuitive sense is far more powerful than any rational, intellectual processes.” Here, Adams suggested he would not be beholden to charts and graphs any more than he would be to pen and paper, the tools of the rational, intellectual composer.

What Adams did not say directly, but the music of *Harmonium* makes clear, is that “throwing away the compass” meant embracing the very kind of erotic, physical energy that fueled *Birth of a Sonority* and *Shaker Loops*. Adams had quoted lines from *Harmonium*’s finale, a seething setting of Emily Dickinson’s erotic fantasia “Wild Nights.” The poem seeps with post-Freudian imagery: of the ocean (an archetypical symbol of the unconscious) and “rowing in Eden” (Dickinson’s metaphor for erotic paradise). “Done with the Compass - / Done with the Chart!” the chorus exclaims. “Rowing in Eden - / Ah - the sea! / Might I but moor - tonight - / In thee!” Adams set the erotic line “rowing in Eden” as a loop reminiscent of the “shaking” motif from *Shaker Loops* (Example 3). In another echo of that earlier work, Adams even wrote the “rowing” loop to continue pulsing along in the lower voices as the sopranos above sing the rest of Dickinson’s evocation of sexual union and mystical wholeness. Here, the sopranos’ ecstatic “verse” seems to arise out of the erotic energy of the “rowing” motif below, just as the cellos’

“verses in the presence of the Lord” seem to be sparked by the “shaking” motif in the violins in [Example 1](#). When Adams claimed that the act of throwing away the chart defined him as a musician, he also defined himself by *Harmonium*’s erotic physicality. In sum, the story of Adams’s musicianly “odyssey,” as he had come to describe it, was this: he had to throw away the chart and learn to row in Eden, or, quite simply, “shake!” Maslow could hardly have put it better himself.

Adams even claimed that it was only by loosening himself out of a compositional approach based on charts and graphs that he had been able to compose *Shaker Loops* at all. In 1983, Adams explained that the piece had begun as a string quartet called *Wavemaker*, an elaborate working-out of Adams’s fascination with the mathematics of wave-form curves. “And by an enormous effort and real self-discipline and doggedness,” he told an interviewer, “I took that piece and I rewrote it... I completely freed myself from all this ideology and these numbers, and these wave-forms that I had drawn on graph paper and hence used to make my compositional decisions with. And the piece became what it is now, a modular piece, very much free of any kind of methodology or ideology, and I think by far one of my best pieces.”⁷² As successful a work as *Shaker Loops* may have been, it was hardly as free of ideology as Adams claimed. Adams had so internalized post-Freudian discourse that it no longer registered as an ideology to him, which only underscores how fundamentally such ideas had shaped him. Adams’s self-actualization was complete.

For Adams, his personal conversion to a Maslowian musicianly identity had wider ramifications. “I think we’re witnessing the death of modernism, and I couldn’t be happier,” Adams declared in the 1986 interview where he had outlined his athletic, physically liberated approach to composition.⁷³ “There is a departure from the rigorous, purist attitude towards creativity that really typifies the great masterpieces of modernism, and also I think the fascination with procedure and technique and with materials. All of this I think has given way to more of a concern with communication and with investing a kind of new humanism into the creative act.” That “new humanism,” it seems, encapsulated all that Adams had learned from Palestine and the experience of composing *Shaker Loops*: that the physical act of music-making could liberate musicians’ carnal creative energies, free them from the rational procedures, charts, and graphs of the modernists, and lead them to discover their authentic, totally physical artistic selves.

Today scholars often associate musical postmodernism with stylistic eclecticism, pastiche, and nonteleological views of history, attributes which Adams certainly embodied. But for Adams the opposition between the postmodern and the modern was also intertwined with the opposition between a post-Freudian musical ethos and the apparent rigors of modernist composition. Palestine taught Adams to shake off such rigors in order to release in himself a totally physical musical flow. In this, Adams differed little from many of his countercultural Bay Area contemporaries. As Binkley has argued, for them “to be loose was to be modern, and to be modern was to tell oneself a story of self-loosening, of a mediated and supervised

⁷² Adams, interview by Plush, “Major Figures in American Music.”

⁷³ This and the next quotation are from Berrow and Gavin, *John Adams*.

relaxation of self-control and an acquired talent for the immersion of oneself in bodily sensations, impulses, and the inevitable flows of daily events.”⁷⁴ For Adams, the only difference was that in his view, to be loose was to be postmodern. “What sets me apart from Reich and Glass is that I am not a modernist,” Adams told another interviewer in 1986.⁷⁵ And indeed, by then Adams had long abandoned the right-handed self-discipline of Reich, which Adams now dismissed as morbidly modernist, for more left-handed, “postmodern” ecstasies.

Musicologists have long since learned to preface any discussion of postmodernism by acknowledging that the term defies simple definitions.⁷⁶ Still, that has not stopped historians from chasing the “essential postmodernist project.”⁷⁷ But talk of essential postmodernist goals tends to obscure the fact that what it meant to be “postmodern” has always been a matter of debate, and Adams’s example reveals that in the 1980s, that debate focused, in part, on the legitimacy of the culture of self-actualization itself. While Adams gleefully replaced modernism with his “new humanism” of self-actualization, meanwhile the celebrated social critic and theorist of postmodernism Jürgen Habermas argued that the contemporary vogue for “self-realization” constituted a “problem” that an authentic postmodern culture must fend off, not embrace.⁷⁸ Adams and Habermas represent diverging but crucial examples of what might be called “actually existing postmodernism,” to adapt a phrase from Benjamin Piekut’s work on experimentalism.⁷⁹ Ultimately, we should understand Adams’s postmodernism of self-actualization as but one, heretofore marginalized voice in an ongoing contemporary debate over what life after the “modern” should be, and in particular, what kind of bodily energies it should privilege.

Pardoning John Adams

To hear him tell it, Adams expected a hero’s welcome for dealing modernism its death blow. No doubt, he has since garnered his share of acclaim, and he now ranks among the most-performed living composers in the United States.⁸⁰ Still, Adams’s liberation came at a cost. For one thing, though Adams claimed to displace modernism with a new humanism, his aesthetic still relied on the long-standing primitivist trope that glorified non-modern peoples for the deeper connection they supposedly maintained to their bodies. This much was evident from the evocation of unnamed primitives in the *Music for Mallet Instruments* program note as much

⁷⁴ Binkley, *Getting Loose*, 10.

⁷⁵ Schwarz, “Process vs. Intuition,” 247.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Kenneth Gloag, *Postmodernism in Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

⁷⁷ Tauskin, *Late Twentieth Century*, 437.

⁷⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity: An Incomplete Project,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 6, 7.

⁷⁹ Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 8.

⁸⁰ See the study conducted by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, which surveyed the repertoire of twenty-two top U.S. orchestras during the 2014–2015 season. Ricky O’Bannon, “By the Numbers: Living Composers,” <https://www.bsomusic.org/stories/by-the-numbers-living-composers/>.

as from Adams's treatment of the Shakers in *Shaker Loops*. Predictably, Adams also imagined the supposedly archaic techniques of these primitive Others to be freely available for appropriation as much as admiration. As Ralph Locke has argued of Steve Reich, Adams lived out "a not unfamiliar case of searching for an expanding of the self in the Other."⁸¹

But if the slightly older Reich and others of his generation had had to travel abroad to discover their primitive Others, Adams needed only to look around to see that there was archaic, ecstatic treasure buried in his own backyard (as he noted in 1983, he had in fact grown up not far from a former Shaker colony).⁸² Malsow had encouraged musicians to make their own familiar musical practices into pathways to self-actualization, and this was precisely what Adams did when in *Shaker Loops* he imagined the U.S. national past and his own musical scene as a culture of transformative peak experience. In the 1970s, it may well have seemed that thinkers like Maslow, places like the Esalen Sports Center, films like *Saturday Night Fever*, and musicians like Palestine and Adams actually did succeed in remaking the United States into a post-Freudian, postmodern utopia of self-actualization.

The catch, of course, was that not all felt welcome in this Maslowian United States. Today, Adams has earned a reputation among critics as an Americanist composer following in the footsteps of Aaron Copland, an image Adams himself has carefully cultivated.⁸³ Not only has he written works with titles like *My Father Knew Charles Ives* and *American Standard*, but he even subtitled his 2008 autobiography *Composing an American Life*. But it was a very particular "America" that Adams composed, at least in the years around 1980: a nation in which a graduate of an elite East Coast university could relocate to San Francisco to pass the long 1970s experimenting with meditation, "holing up and reading Zen stories" (as Adams wrote years later), imbibing Norman O. Brown's erotic countercultural philosophy, and envisioning Western art music as a medium of peak experience.⁸⁴ This America, despite the esteem with which it regarded the thought and practice of its Others, still followed colonial patterns of encounter and consumption. And despite its professed humanism, this America remained exclusive, offering what some perceived to be so much "jive shit for rich white folk," as one graffiti artist once labeled the Esalen Institute.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ralph Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 288. See also Sumanth Gopinath, "Composer Looks East: Steve Reich and Discourse on Non-Western Music," *Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts* 3, nos. 3–4 (2004): 134–45.

⁸² Adams mentions the New Hampshire Shaker colony in Adams, interview by Plush, "Major Figures in American Music."

⁸³ See the essays by Alex Ross and Joshua Kosman in *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*. Note the emphasis on Adams's "American" status in the subtitle of this volume as well.

⁸⁴ Adams describes his meditation practice in Adams, interview by Plush, "Major Figures in American Music." The composer cited a scene from Brown's *Love's Body* in a 1980 interview. See Adams, interview by Cott, "An Interview with John Adams by Jonathan Cott, June 1985," and Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990 [1966]). Adams's Jungian therapy is discussed in Richard Stayton, "The Trickster of Modern Music: Composer John Adams Keeps Reinventing Himself, to Wilder and Wilder Applause," *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 1991, http://articles.latimes.com/1991-06-16/magazine/tm-1335_1_composer-john-adams/6.

⁸⁵ Kripal, *Esalen*, 401.

Evidently, Adams's was not everyone's "American life." Wolfe, for his part, would probably have heard in Adams's "new humanism" nothing but "Me... Me... Me... Me..."⁸⁶ Other critics did not leave us guessing. In a 1989 talk, musicologist Richard Taruskin described Adams's attempt at "rehumanizing" contemporary musical culture as an indulgent and politically irresponsible appeal to the "autonomic nervous system," the system of unconscious functions of the body from sexual arousal to fight or flight responses.⁸⁷ "Do we have no other choice than a choice of dehumanization?" Taruskin wrote of Adams's notorious 1982 *Grand Piano Music*, which in addition to an infamous Beethoven pastiche, also made ample use of the libidinous idiom Adams first invented for *Shaker Loops*. "On the one hand there is music, increasingly under attack, that makes its appeal exclusively to the cerebral cortex. On the other hand there is a music, increasingly successful, that speaks, if I may put it so, directly to the medulla and the ganglia." Taruskin echoed other critics' takes on Adams's carnal music. "The pulse, that's the main thing. It hums, it thrums, surging, tidal, as blind, libidinous, and basic as a heartbeat," Laurence Shames wrote of *Harmonium* in 1984.⁸⁸ "The music is gut, vast, viscous; you can float on it or smother, depending on your mood. A single chord becomes an ocean here. ... And always there is that pulse, galvanic, relentless, almost shockingly intimate." For Taruskin, Adams's flowing, oceanic music smothered the ego rather than buoyed it up—and there was nothing "fully human" about that.

We might also want to question Adams's sexual politics. When Adams said in 1983 that his music featured a "more physiological, physical, visceral thrust," it was not difficult to guess what physiology he had in mind. In light of this, Adams's musical language could possibly be heard not simply as erotic but as specifically phallic. And we might speculate that such an interpretation may have resonated with some feminists in the 1970s, who sometimes joined more conservative critics in questioning the post-Freudian movement's professed universality. For instance, though Betty Friedan had drawn on Maslow's notion of self-actualization to argue for women's empowerment in the 1960s, she later reacted harshly against the "mountain macho man" ethos she perceived among purveyors of self-actualization culture at the Esalen Institute.⁸⁹

To be clear, no one is accusing Adams of such behavior. But when we take Adams's commentary into account, we could potentially hear a work like *Shaker*

⁸⁶ Wolfe, "The Me Decade," 167. We might assume the same of Wim Mertens, whose groundbreaking 1985 study *American Minimal Music* argued that "the so-called *religious* experience of repetitive music is in fact a camouflaged erotic experience" that can "lead to psychological regression." Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, trans. J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn and Averill, 1985), 124. Emphasis original.

⁸⁷ This and the following quotations are from Richard Taruskin, "Et In Arcadio Ego; or, I Didn't Know I Was Such a Pessimist until I Wrote This Thing (a talk)," in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 14–15. Originally delivered as an address at the Chicago Seminars on the Future, April 13, 1989.

⁸⁸ This and the following quotation are from Laurence Shames, "Listen to John Adams," *Esquire*, December 1984, quoted in Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 192.

⁸⁹ Ed Maupin used these words to describe Friedan's take on Esalen. Maupin's account is quoted in Kripal, *Esalen*, 461. For Friedan on Maslow, see Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 381–82.

Loops to reflect, if not necessarily condone, the same phallicist social order that offended feminists like Friedan. If we consider Susan McClary's critiques of the "thrust" of certain nineteenth-century symphonies, moments like the explosive, "shaking" climax in the first movement of *Shaker Loops* start to sound "neoromantic" in more ways than one.⁹⁰ Indeed, the fact that there are true climaxes in Adams's early postminimalist works at all, in place of the "nonteleological space of pleasure" Fink and McClary herself have identified in other minimalist music, makes it all the easier to hear Adams's idiosyncratic post-Freudian aesthetic as phallicentric.⁹¹ I do not wish to suggest that no women experienced carnal self-actualization along the lines Adams proposed, nor do I want to essentialize Adams's music as inherently male; but I do want to argue that such debates may well have occupied Adams's contemporaries, and that they should occupy us as we assess Adams's legacy.

For questions like these have been largely absent from critical discourse on Adams's work. One explanation is that the cultural history of minimalism is only beginning to be written.⁹² But another might be the fact that the fight waged by reformers like Maslow and Adams to make America post-Freudian was in many ways successful. Indeed, Maslowian ideas are so ubiquitous today that like Adams, we might mistake its ideology for the world as it is. Books like Esalen guru Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis* are bestsellers. Meanwhile, corporate mainstays like Nike and newer arrivals like Soul Cycle thrive on post-Freudian slogans like "just do it" and "change your body, find your SOUL." Whereas in the 1970s, Richard Nixon tried to shut down countercultural havens like Esalen through covert media sabotage, in our own day schoolchildren do yoga on the White House lawn.⁹³ In the musical realm, techniques like double bassist Barry Green's "inner game of music" (a spin-off of Gallwey's "inner game of tennis") and soprano Irene Gubrud's "Meditation for Peak Performance," not to mention courses in Alexander Technique and other body awareness disciplines, have been part of major U.S. art music training institutions since the late 1980s.⁹⁴ If these examples do not speak directly of sex and self-actualization, they do link physical expenditure and self-fulfillment in a way Maslow and other post-Freudian advocates would have applauded. By confronting the more far-out, primitivist, and perhaps phallic origins of these now commonplace discourses and practices, we can better grapple with the political and ethical stakes of their continued popularity.

⁹⁰ See Susan McClary, "Getting Down Off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman's Voice in Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II*," *Minnesota Composers Forum Newsletter* (January 1987), reprinted in Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 112–31.

⁹¹ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 35.

⁹² On the dearth of interpretive studies of minimalist music, see the introduction in Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*. That gap has since begun to be filled. See, for example, Grimshaw, *La Monte Young*.

⁹³ On Nixon and Esalen, see Kripal, *Esalen*, 132. On yoga at the White House, see Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 4–6.

⁹⁴ See Barry Green and W. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Music* (New York: Doubleday, 1986). On Gubrud's technique, see "Irene Gubrud: Voice Teacher and Soprano," *Classical Singer*, <https://www.classicalsinger.net/IreneGubrud>.

“Pardon my California years,” Adams entreated journalist David Sterritt in 1987. As Sterritt slyly related, Adams had just described composition as “a matter of ‘modulating the energy’ ... smiling at the trendy overtones of his words.”⁹⁵ Trendy indeed: the phrase “modulating the energy” might have reminded Sterritt of any number of then-fashionable techniques of self-exploration and well-being spawned by the late counterculture.⁹⁶ Adams was clearly embarrassed by the admission, perhaps rightly recognizing in the run-up to the premiere of his blockbuster opera *Nixon in China* that New Age catchphrases were not likely to win him many fans among the opera-going set. We may no longer find Adams’s energy-modulating aesthetic so embarrassing. But even if we are ready to forgive Adams his California years, we should not forget them if we want to understand our late, late countercultural present.

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⁹⁵ David Sterritt, “John Adams and His ‘Nixon in China’: Could This Be Another ‘Porgy and Bess’?,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 9, 1987.

⁹⁶ In the practice known as Therapeutic Touch, for instance, devotees learned “to help or to heal” through a meditative technique of “directing and modulating the transfer of human energy,” as a 1979 handbook put it. Dolores Krieger, *Therapeutic Touch: How to Use Your Hands to Help or to Heal* (New York: Fireside Books, 1979), 58. On contemporary energy disciplines, see Catherine L. Albanese, “The Aura of Wellness: Subtle-Energy Healing and New Age Religion,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10, no. 1 (2000): 29–55.

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